

# Christian Universities as a Mission Strategy: Recovering the Lost Vision

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In the mid-19th century, a Scottish crofter's son named Alexander Duff made the case for Christian higher education as a means of evangelization in India. Timothy Richard, a Welsh Baptist converted during the revival of 1858-60, made a similar case for missions in China. During the next hundred years, Christian colleges and universities were founded in both places, and others besides, with remarkable fervor. By the middle of the 20th century, however, mission boards and churches had turned off the spigot. Since then, the university has ceased to be seen as an instrument for Christian outreach.

Exactly why this change took place is not the subject of these pages. The question here is whether Christian universities should be given fresh consideration as an essential mission strategy. At the very least, let us note the irony of the present situation: While Christian colleges are regarded as indispensable in the West, western Christians view them as a luxury elsewhere. Folks beyond the North Atlantic quadrant need missionary training centers, Bible colleges, and other such institutions to train church-related workers, but not Christian colleges and universities. Or so it is thought.

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## **The Case Against Christian Higher Education**

Serious issues, however, must be taken into consideration before promoting greater reliance on Christian colleges and universities as a means of world mission. If not addressed, Christian liberal arts education will indeed become a luxury item, serving the personal interests of people in the two-thirds world without serving the church.

(1) **The external threat.** On several occasions, reaction to conversions at Duff's school almost torpedoed the new institution. The same thing happened at other Protestant schools set up at that time. And within a generation, education in India was officially secularized. It is one thing when poor lepers are converted. It is quite another, though, when the cream of society is poured off into "foreign" vessels, or when Christians attempt to empower the poor in a social system adamantly opposed to advancing people on the basis of personal merit. In our own day, as in Duff's, pressure can be expected from the power structure whenever western education migrates from the purely useful to the purposeful. Outside the Christian community, western education is valued only for its material benefits, not its spiritual ones. Consequently, insofar as Christian institutions limit their impact to the useful arts, they will be welcome. But the moment it becomes clear that their education has moral and spiritual impact as well, there will be problems.

(2) **The internal threat.** In part, because of these external pressures, Christian institutions of higher education are often compromised. In order to meet the requirements (whether real or perceived) of the power structure, they adjust their educational standards downward, diminishing the importance of faith. Like politicians, they

figure that "unless I am in a position of influence, I can do no good; and unless I make a few compromises, I will not be in a position of influence." But that is the least of the problems affecting the integrity of Christian colleges and universities. The stronger force, by far, is the intellectual milieu, which acts upon scholars in a far more insidious fashion. And that is the operative word: fashion. Relatively few scholars can resist the intellectual trends. It's understandable. We are social creatures. We like a good party. And not many of us want to be the skunk at the party. The result is sometimes a faculty of chameleons—as pious as you like for the folks back home (who pay the bills), but Sadducean in their approach to the academic disciplines.

(3) **The religious mix of students.** If a Christian college serves only as a "hot house" for children from Christian homes, a place to protect them in their early years from the carnality and corrosive ideas associated with secular institutions, it will not be of much help in world missions. And that, of course, has been the attraction of most Christian colleges in the West, which have only recently begun to emerge from their defensive, fundamentalist shell. On the other hand, if a Christian college is attended predominantly by nonbelievers, as was the case in India when Duff and his fellow Scots first got established, evangelization will be exceedingly difficult. Peer relationships between sincere believers in Christ and seekers from other religious backgrounds are essential for effective evangelism. But creating and maintaining a healthy balance between the two is not easy.

(4) **The high cost of higher education.** Cost-benefit analysis is inescapable in today's world, even in the area of evangelization. It's also useful—to a point. God probably doesn't care any

more for the Christian spendthrift than he does for the Christian tightwad; either one wastes the resources entrusted to us for his purposes. So it is right to ask if Christian colleges and universities represent a good investment for world missions. The reality is that they are costly. Compare a college with a church, for example. A church can get along with just one pastor for, say, 400-500 parishioners; a college needs a professor for perhaps every 20 students. A church can get by with just one building, plus an educational wing; a typical small college will have a dozen buildings or more. The comparison is not lost on investors in world missions. Nor should it be. And the fact that most western churches would fold if subject to a comparable cost-benefit analysis—dollars spent per convert, for example—doesn't change the picture for Christian colleges and universities: they're expensive.

(5) **The relationship between faith and learning.** On this matter, two questions must be asked. First, what can a Christian liberal arts college do that no other institution can? Second, how many Christian liberal arts colleges are doing that? If the aim of a Christian college is simply to provide "a good education plus biblical studies in an atmosphere of piety," as a friendly critic described the situation at many institutions, the opportunity is largely wasted. Good education is available elsewhere at less expense (state-subsidized institutions) and with more prestige (older private institutions); Christian fellowship and Bible study groups can be found at campus ministries and neighboring churches.

### **The Case For Christian Higher Education**

The real value of a Christian college lies in its unique ability to affirm the fundamental unity of all truth, in ways that serve the deepest needs of the human person. This is done by using Christian theology as the starting point of an education directed toward all aspects of culture. This theological commitment does not mean that the scholars in these institutions can afford to be any less open to facts and ideas from outside their immediate religious tradition than

other scholars are. On the contrary, Christians must be all the more open to "outside" information, trusting that God is the author of all truth.

The absence of a theological commitment at other institutions should not be mistaken for neutrality or greater openness. Non-Christian scholars are as certain as Christian scholars to approach their disciplines with starting points of some sort. Wherever formal religion is removed as the overarching philosophy of life, other ideas come into play, filling the void. In the 20th century, naturalism, pragmatism, Nazism, Marxism, feminism, narcissism, and multiculturalism have all had their run. One ideology or another, or a combination of them, has generally reigned supreme for a time as the touchstone of scholarly judgment in a vast array of academic disciplines. The only fields of study even remotely safe from such assumptions are technical ones, such as engineering, chemistry, physics, math, and medicine. But engineers, scientists, mathematicians, and medical doctors are by no means safe from interpretations of life offered by the passing parade of philosophical trends, for they must seek meaning for their own lives outside of their disciplines. Occasionally, they are drawn to the most irrational cults and ideologies on the market, perhaps in reaction to the analytical rigor of their own work. And all too often, their technical expertise is commandeered or recruited for destructive and dehumanizing ends.

Unless all higher education is abandoned, it should be clear that Christian higher education is needed to instill humane values, or to preserve sanity, on our planet. Obviously, higher education is not being abandoned. It's been around for more than 800 years. And today, "a quiet revolution ... is transforming societies around the world. Enrolments [Brit] in higher education have surged in the past two decades, and the trend, if anything, is accelerating rather than slowing down," notes the Economist. In China, despite stiff tuition fees, enrollments jumped 200 percent between 1999 and 2001. Throughout the developing world, demand has far outpaced access in recent years. And in many

nations within the developed world, nearly half the student population enters post-secondary programs.

Globalization explains much of this demand. There is almost no place left in the world where the material fruits of the global economy are not known, and once having witnessed the vast cornucopia of consumer goods churned out by the modern economy, almost no one wants to be left out. Ballooning enrollments reflect the growing aspiration around the world for knowledge and skills that open the door to meaningful participation in the global economy.

But there is another explanation for this "quiet revolution," for which the church has not received due credit. Students cannot qualify for universities without first completing primary and secondary programs—and they cannot complete these programs without being literate. Literacy is now taken for granted in most countries. But in the early 1920s only 25 percent of the children born in poor countries had learned to read. By 1999, the numbers were reversed: three out of every four adults in developing nations could read. Precisely what portion of this leap the church is responsible for, either directly or indirectly, is hard to say. But there is no denying the church's leading role in this campaign, both in the developing world, during the past century-and-a-half, and in Europe and America before that. Universal literacy is the natural outgrowth of a universal faith that looks to written revelation as an essential source of guidance for faith and life.

Having done so much to prepare the soil for higher education in the developing world, the question before us today is whether the church is prepared to turn over the entire field, or most of it, to others. On several continents, corporations and western universities are quickly capitalizing on the current demand for higher education. Via the Internet, they are developing massive educational enterprises to attract eager young minds—and dollars. Meanwhile, the church looks on. ☉